ROBERT A.
HEINLEIN
ORDEAL
IN SPACE

Maybe we should never have ventured out into space. Our race has but two basic, innate fears; noise and the fear of falling. Those terrible heights - Why should any man in his right mind let himself be placed where he could fall . . . and fall . . . and fall - But all spacemen are crazy. Everybody knows that.

The medicos had been very kind, he supposed. 'You're lucky. You want to remember that, old fellow. You're still young and your retired pay relieves you of all worry about your future. You've got both arms and legs and are in fine shape.'

'Fine shape!' His voice was unintentionally contemptuous.

'No, I mean it,' the chief psychiatrist had persisted gently. 'The little quirk you have does you no harm at all - except that you can't go into space again. I can't honestly call acrophobia a neurosis; fear of falling is normal and sane. You've just got it a little more strongly than most - but that is not abnormal, in view of what you have been through.'

The reminder set him to shaking again. He closed his eyes and saw the stars wheeling below him again. He was falling, falling endlessly. The psychiatrist's voice came through to him and pulled him back. 'Steady, old man! Look around you.'

'Sorry.'

'Not at all. Now tell me, what do you plan to do?'

'I don't know. Get a job, I suppose.'

'The Company will give you a job, you know.'

He shook his head. 'I don't want to hang around a spaceport.' Wear a little button in his shirt to show that he was once a man, be addressed by a courtesy title of captain, claim the privileges of the pilots' lounge on the basis of what he used to be, hear the shop talk die down whenever he approached a group, wonder what they were saying behind his back - no, thank you!

'I think you're wise. Best to make a clean break, for a while at

least, until you are feeling better.'

'You think I'll get over it?'

The psychiatrist pursed his lips. 'Possible. It's functional, you know. No trauma.'

'But you don't think so?'

'I didn't say that. I honestly don't know. We still know very little about what makes a man tick.'

'I see. Well, I might as well be leaving.'

The psychiatrist stood up and shoved out his hand. 'Holler if you want anything. And come back to see us in any case.'

'Thanks.'

'You're going to be all right. I know it.'

But the psychiatrist shook his head as his patient walked out. The man did not walk like a spaceman; the easy, animal self-confidence was gone.

Only a small part of Great New York was roofed over in those days; he stayed underground until he was in that section, then sought out a passageway lined with bachelor rooms. He stuck a coin in the slot of the first one which displayed a lighted 'vacant' sign, chucked his jump bag inside, and left. The monitor at the intersection gave him the address of the nearest placement office. He went there, seated himself at an interview desk, stamped in his finger prints, and started filling out forms. It gave him a curious back-to-the-beginning feeling; he had not looked for a job since pre-cadet days.

He left filling in his name to the last and hesitated even then. He had had more than his bellyful of publicity; he did not want to be recognized; he certainly did not want to be throbbed over - and most of all he did not want anyone telling him he was a hero. Presently he printed in the name 'William Saunders' and dropped the forms in the slot.

He was well into his third cigarette and getting ready to strike another when the screen in front of him at last lighted up. He found

himself staring at a nice-looking brunette. 'Mr. Saunders,' the image said, will you come inside, please? Door seventeen.'

The brunette in person was there to offer him a seat and a cigarette. 'Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Saunders. I'm Miss Joyce. I'd like to talk with you about your application.' He settled himself and waited, without speaking.

When she saw that he did not intend to speak, she added, 'Now take this name "William Saunders" which you have given us - we know who you are, of course, from your prints.

'I suppose so.'

'Of course I know what everybody knows about you, but your action in calling yourself "William Saunders", Mr. -'

'Saunders.'

'- Mr. Saunders, caused me to query the files.' She held up a microfilm spool, turned so that he might read his own name on it. 'I know quite a lot about you now - more than the public knows and more than you saw fit to put into your application. It's a good record, Mr. Saunders.'

'Thank you.'

'But I can't use it in placing you in a job. I can't even refer to it if you insist on designating yourself as "Saunders".'

'The name is Saunders.' His voice was flat, rather than emphatic.

'Don't be hasty, Mr. Saunders. There are many positions in which the factor of prestige can be used quite legitimately to obtain for a client a much higher beginning of pay than-'

'I'm not interested.'

She looked at him and decided not to insist. 'As you wish. If you will go to reception room B, you can start your classification and skill tests.'

'Thank you.'

'If you should change your mind later, Mr. Saunders, we will be glad to reopen the case. Through that door, please.'

Three days later found him at work for a small firm specializing in custom-built communication systems. His job was calibrating electronic equipment. It was soothing work, demanding enough to occupy his mind, yet easy for a man of his training and experience. At the end of his three months' probation he was promoted out of the helper category.

He was building himself a well-insulated rut, working, sleeping, eating, spending an occasional evening at the public library or working out at the YMCA - and never, under any circumstances, going out under the open sky nor up to any height, not even a theater balcony.

He tried to keep his past life shut out of his mind, but his memory of it was still fresh; he would find himself daydreaming - the star-sharp, frozen sky of Mars, or the roaring night life of Venusburg. He would see again the swollen, ruddy bulk of Jupiter hanging over the port on Ganymede, its oblate bloated shape impossibly huge and crowding the sky.

Or he might, for a time, feel again the sweet quiet of the long watches on the lonely reaches between the planets. But such reveries were dangerous; they cut close to the edge of his new peace of mind. It was easy to slide over and find himself clinging for life to his last handhold on the steel sides of the Valkyrie, fingers numb and failing, and nothing below him but the bottomless well of space.

Then he would come back to Earth, shaking uncontrollably and gripping his chair or the workbench.

The first time it had happened at work he had found one of his benchmates, Joe Tully, staring at him curiously. 'What's the trouble, Bill?' he had asked. 'Hangover?'

'Nothing,' he had managed to say. 'Just a chill.'

'You better take a pill. Come on - let's go to lunch.'

Tully led the way to the elevator; they crowded in. Most of the employees - even the women - preferred to go down via the drop chute, but Tully always used the elevator. 'Saunders', of course, never used the drop chute; this had eased them into the habit of lunching together. He knew that the chute was safe, that, even if the power should fail, safety nets would snap across at each floor level - but he could not force himself to step off the edge.

Tully said publicly that a drop-chute landing hurt his arches, but he confided privately to Saunders that he did not trust automatic machinery. Saunders nodded understandingly but said nothing. It warmed him toward Tully. He began feeling friendly and not on the defensive with another human being for the first time since the start of his new life. He began to want to tell Tully the truth about himself. If he could be sure that Joe would not insist on treating him as a hero - not that he really objected to the role of hero. As a kid, hanging around spaceports, trying to wangle chances to go inside the ships, cutting classes to watch take-offs, he had dreamed of being a 'hero' someday, a hero of the spaceways, returning in triumph from some incredible and dangerous piece of exploration. But he was troubled by the fact that he still had the same picture of what a hero should look like and how he should behave; it did not include shying away from open windows, being fearful of walking across an open square, and growing too upset to speak at the mere thought of boundless depths of space.

Tully invited him home for dinner. He wanted to go, but fended off the invitation while he inquired where Tully lived. The Shelton Homes, Tully told him, naming one of those great, boxlike warrens that used to disfigure the Jersey flats. 'It's a long way to come back,' Saunders said doubtfully, while turning over in his mind ways to get there without exposing himself to the things he feared.

'You won't have to come back,' Tully assured him. 'We've got a spare room. Come on. My old lady does her own cooking - that's why I keep her.'

'Well, all right,' he conceded. 'Thanks, Joe.' The La Guardia Tube would take him within a quarter of a mile; if he could not find a covered way he would take a ground cab and close the shades.

Tully met him in the hail and apologized in a whisper. 'Meant to have a young lady for you, Bill. Instead we've got my brother-in-law. He's a louse. Sorry.'

'Forget it, Joe. I'm glad to be here.' He was indeed. The discovery that Bill's flat was on the thirty-fifth floor had dismayed him at first, but he was delighted to find that he had no feeling of height. The lights were on, the windows occulted, the floor under him was rock solid; he felt warm and safe. Mrs. Tully turned out in fact to be a good cook, to his surprise - he had the bachelor's usual distrust of amateur cooking. He let himself go to the pleasure of feeling at home and safe and wanted; he managed not even to hear most of the aggressive and

opinionated remarks of Joe's in-law.

After dinner he relaxed in an easy chair, glass of beer in hand, and watched the video screen. It was a musical comedy; he laughed more heartily than he had in months. Presently the comedy gave way to a religious program, the National Cathedral Choir; he let it be, listening with one ear and giving some attention to the conversation with the other.

The choir was more than half way through Prayer for Travelers before he became fully aware of what they were singing:

Hear us when we pray to Thee

For those in peril on the sea.

'Almighty Ruler of them all

Whose power extends to great and small,

Who guides the stars and steadfast law,

Whose least creation fills with awe;

Oh, grant Thy mercy and Thy grace

To those who venture into space.'

He wanted to switch it off, but he had to hear it out, he could not stop listening to it, though it hurt him in his heart with the unbearable homesickness of the hopelessly exiled. Even as a cadet this one hymn could fill his eyes with tears; now he kept his face turned away from the others to try to hide from them the drops wetting his cheeks.

When the choir's 'amen' let him do so he switched quickly to some other - any other - program and remained bent over the instrument, pretending to fiddle with it, while he composed his features. Then he turned back to the company, outwardly serene, though it seemed to him that anyone could see the hard, aching knot in his middle.

The brother-in-law was still sounding off.

'We ought to annex 'em,' he was saying. 'That's what we ought to do. Three-Planets Treaty - what a lot of ruddy rot! What right have they got to tell us what we can and can't do on Mars?'

'Well, Ed,' Tully said mildly, 'it's their planet, isn't it? They were there first.'

Ed brushed it aside. 'Did we ask the Indians whether or not they wanted us in North America? Nobody has any right to hang on to something he doesn't know how to use. With proper exploitation -'

'You been speculating, Ed?'

'Huh? It wouldn't be speculation if the government wasn't made up of a bunch of weak-spined old women. "Rights of Natives", indeed. What rights do a bunch of degenerates have?'

Saunders found himself contrasting Ed Schultz with Knath Sooth, the only Martian he himself had ever known well. Gentle Knath, who had been old before Ed was born, and yet was rated as young among his own kind. Knath... why, Knath could sit for hours with a friend or trusted acquaintance, saying nothing, needing to say nothing. 'Growing together' they called it - his entire race had so grown together that they had needed no government, until the Earthman came.

Saunders had once asked his friend why he exerted himself so little, was satisfied with so little. More than an hour passed and Saunders was beginning to regret his inquisitiveness when Knath replied, 'My fathers have labored and I am weary.'

Saunders sat up and faced the brother-in-law. 'They are not degenerate.'

'Huh? I suppose you are an expert!'

'The Martians aren't degenerate, they're just tired,' Saunders persisted.

Tully grinned. His brother-in-law saw it and became surly. 'What gives you the right to an opinion? Have you ever been to Mars?'

Saunders realized suddenly that he had let his censors down. 'Have you?' he answered cautiously.

'That's beside the point. The best minds all agree -' Bill let him go

on and did not contradict him again. It was a relief when Tully suggested that, since they all had to be up early, maybe it was about time to think about beginning to get ready to go to bed.

He said goodnight to Mrs. Tully and thanked her for a wonderful dinner, then followed Tully into the guest room. 'Only way to get rid of that family curse we're saddled with, Bill,' he apologized. 'Stay up as long as you like.' Tully stepped to the window and opened it. 'You'll sleep well here. We're up high enough to get honest-to-goodness fresh air.' He stuck his head out and took a couple of big breaths. 'Nothing like the real article,' he continued as he withdrew from the window. 'I'm a country boy at heart. What's the matter, Bill?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all.'

'I thought you looked a little pale. Well, sleep tight. I've already set your bed for seven; that'll give us plenty of time.'

'Thanks, Joe. Goodnight.' As soon as Tully was out of the room he braced himself, then went over and closed the window. Sweating, he turned away and switched the ventilation back on. That done, he sank down on the edge of the bed.

He sat there for a long time, striking one cigarette after another. He knew too well that the peace of mind he thought he had regained was unreal. There was nothing left to him but shame and a long, long hurt. To have reached the point where he had to knuckle under to a tenth-rate knothead like Ed Schultz - it would have been better if he had never come out of the Valkyrie business.

Presently he took five grains of 'Fly-Rite' from his pouch, swallowed it, and went to bed. He got up almost at once, forced himself to open the window a trifle, then compromised by changing the setting of the bed so that it would not turn out the lights after he got to sleep.

He had been asleep and dreaming for an indefinitely long time. He was back in space again - indeed, he had never been away from it. He was happy, with the full happiness of a man who has awakened to find it was only a bad dream.

The crying disturbed his serenity. At first it made him only vaguely uneasy, then he began to feel in some way responsible - he must do something about it. The transition to falling had only dream logic behind it, but it was real to him. He was grasping, his hands were slipping, had slipped - and there was nothing under him but the

black emptiness of space - He was awake and gasping, on Joe Tully's guest-room bed; the lights burned bright around him.

But the crying persisted.

He shook his head, then listened. It was real all right. Now he had it identified - a cat, a kitten by the sound of it.

He sat up. Even if he had not had the spaceman's traditional fondness for cats, he would have investigated. However, he liked cats for themselves, quite aside from their neat shipboard habits, their ready adaptability to changing accelerations, and their usefulness in keeping the ship free of those other creatures that go wherever man goes. So he got up at once and looked for this one.

A quick look around showed him that the kitten was not in the room, and his ear led him to the correct spot; the sound came in through the slightly opened window. He shied off, stopped, and tried to collect his thoughts.

He told himself that it was unnecessary to do anything more; if the sound came in through the window, then it must be because it came out of some nearby window. But he knew that he was lying to himself; the sound was close by. In some impossible way the cat was just outside his window, thirty-five stories above the street.

He sat down and tried to strike a cigarette, but the tube broke in his fingers. He let the fragments fall to the floor, got up and took six nervous steps toward the window, as if he were being jerked along. He sank down to his knees, grasped the window and threw it wide open, then clung to the windowsill, his eyes tight shut.

After a time the sill seemed to steady a bit. He opened his eyes, gasped, and shut them again. Finally he opened them again, being very careful not to look out at the stars, not to look down at the street. He had half expected to find the cat on a balcony outside his room - it seemed the only reasonable explanation. But there was no balcony, no place at all where a cat could reasonably be.

However, the mewing was louder than ever. It seemed to come from directly under him. Slowly he forced his head out, still clinging to the sill, and made himself look down. Under him, about four feet lower than the edge of the window, a narrow ledge ran around the side of the building. Seated on it was a woe-begone ratty-looking kitten. It stared up at him and meowed again.

It was barely possible that, by clinging to the sill with one hand and making a long arm with the other, he could reach it without actually going out the window, he thought - if he could bring himself to do it. He considered calling Tully, then thought better of it. Tully was shorter than he was, had less reach. And the kitten had to be rescued now, before the fluff-brained idiot jumped or fell.

He tried for it. He shoved his shoulders out, clung with his left arm and reached down with his right. Then he opened his eyes and saw that he was a foot or ten inches away from the kitten still. It sniffed curiously in the direction of his hand.

He stretched till his bones cracked. The kitten promptly skittered away from his clutching fingers, stopping a good six feet down the ledge. There it settled down and commenced washing its face.

He inched back inside and collapsed, sobbing, on the floor underneath the window. 'I can't do it,' he whispered. 'I can't do it. Not again -'

The Rocket Ship Valkyrie was two hundred and forty-nine days out from Earth-Luna Space Terminal and approaching Mars Terminal on Deimos, outer Martian satellite. William Cole, Chief Communications Officer and relief pilot, was sleeping sweetly when his assistant shook him. 'Hey! Bill! Wake up - we're in a jam.'

'Huh? Wazzat?' But he was already reaching for his socks. 'What's the trouble, Tom?'

Fifteen minutes later he knew that his junior officer had not exaggerated; he was reporting the facts to the Old Man - the primary piloting radar was out of whack. Tom Sandburg had discovered it during a routine check, made as soon as Mars was inside the maximum range of the radar pilot. The captain had shrugged. 'Fix it, Mister - and be quick about it. We need it.'

Bill Cole shook his head. 'There's nothing wrong with it, Captain - inside. She acts as if the antenna were gone completely.'

'That's impossible. We haven't even had a meteor alarm.'

'Might be anything, Captain. Might be metal fatigue and it just fell off. But we've got to replace that antenna. Stop the spin on the ship and I'll go out and fix it. I can jury-rig a replacement while she loses

her spin.'

The Valkyrie was a luxury ship, of her day. She was assembled long before anyone had any idea of how to produce an artificial gravity field. Nevertheless she had pseudogravity for the comfort of her passengers. She spun endlessly around her main axis, like a shell from a rifled gun; the resulting angular acceleration - miscalled 'centrifugal force' - kept her passengers firm in their beds, or steady on their feet. The spin was started as soon as her rockets stopped blasting at the beginning of a trip and was stopped only when it was necessary to maneuver into a landing. It was accomplished, not by magic, but by reaction against the contrary spin of a flywheel located on her centerline.

The captain looked annoyed. 'I've started to take the spin off, but I can't wait that long. Jury-rig the astrogational radar for piloting.'

Cole started to explain why the astrogational radar could not be adapted to short-range work, then decided not to try. 'It can't be done, sir. It's a technical impossibility.'

'When I was your age I could jury-rig anything! Well, find me an answer, Mister. I can't take this ship down blind. Not even for the Harriman Medal.'

Bill Cole hesitated for a moment before replying. 'I'll have to go out while she's still got spin on her, Captain, and make the replacement. There isn't any other way to do it.'

The captain looked away from him, his jaw muscles flexed. 'Get the replacement ready. Hurry up about it.'

Cole found the captain already at the airlock when he arrived with the gear he needed for the repair. To his surprise the Old Man was suited up. 'Explain to me what I'm to do,' he ordered Bill.

'You're not going out, sir?' The captain simply nodded.

Bill took a look at his captain's waist line, or where his waist line used to be. Why, the Old Man must be thirty-five if he was a day! 'I'm afraid I can't explain too clearly. I had expected to make the repair myself.'

'I've never asked a man to do a job I wouldn't do myself. Explain it to me.'

'Excuse me, sir - but can you chin yourself with one hand?'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Well, we've got forty-eight passengers, sir, and -' 'Shut up!'

Sandburg and he, both in space suits, helped the Old Man down the hole after the inner door of the lock was closed and the air exhausted. The space beyond the lock was a vast, starflecked emptiness. With spin still on the ship, every direction outward was 'down', down for millions of uncounted miles. They put a safety line on him, of course - nevertheless it gave him a sinking feeling to see the captain's head disappear in the bottomless, black hole.

The line paid out steadily for several feet, then stopped. When it had been stopped for several minutes, Bill leaned over and touched his helmet against Sandburg's. 'Hang on to my feet. I'm going to take a look.'

He hung head down out the lock and looked around. The captain was stopped, hanging by both hands, nowhere near the antenna fixture. He scrambled back up and reversed himself. 'I'm going out.'

It was no great trick, he found, to hang by his hands and swing himself along to where the captain was stalled. The Valkyrie was a space-to-space ship, not like the sleek-sided jobs we see around earthports; she was covered with handholds for the convenience of repairmen at the terminals. Once he reached him, it was possible, by grasping the safe steel rung that the captain clung to, to aid him in swinging back to the last one he had quitted. Five minutes later Sandburg was pulling the Old Man up through the hole and Bill was scrambling after him.

He began at once to unbuckle the repair gear from the captain's suit and transfer it to his own. He lowered himself back down the hole and was on his way before the older man had recovered enough to object, if he still intended to.

Swinging out to where the antenna must be replaced was not too hard, though he had all eternity under his toes. The suit impeded him a little - the gloves were clumsy - but he was used to spacesuits. He was a little winded from helping the captain, but he could not stop to think about that. The increased spin bothered him somewhat; the airlock was nearer the axis of spin than was the antenna - he felt heavier as he moved out.

Getting the replacement antenna shipped was another matter. It was neither large nor heavy, but he found it impossible to fasten it into place. He needed one hand to cling by, one to hold the antenna, and one to handle the wrench. That left him shy one hand, no matter how he tried it.

Finally he jerked his safety line to signal Sandburg for more slack. Then he unshackled it from his waist, working with one hand, passed the end twice through a handhold and knotted it; he left about six feet of it hanging free. The shackle on the free end he fastened to another handhold. The result was a loop, a bight, an improvised bosun's chair, which would support his weight while he man-handled the antenna into place. The job went fairly quickly then.

He was almost through. There remained one bolt to fasten on the far side, away from where he swung. The antenna was already secured at two points and its circuit connection made. He decided he could manage it with one hand. He left his perch and swung over, monkey fashion.

The wrench slipped as he finished tightening the bolt; it slipped from his grasp, fell free. He watched it go, out and out and out, down and down and down, until it was so small he could no longer see it. It made him dizzy to watch it, bright in the sunlight against the deep black of space. He had been too busy to look down, up to now.

He shivered. 'Good thing I was through with it,' he said. 'It would be a long walk to fetch it.' He started to make his way back.

He found that he could not.

He had swung past the antenna to reach his present position, using a grip on his safety-line swing to give him a few inches more reach. Now the loop of line hung quietly, just out of reach. There was no way to reverse the process.

He hung by both hands and told himself not to get panicky - he must think his way out. Around the other side? No, the steel skin of the Valkyrie was smooth there - no handhold for more than six feet. Even if he were not tired - and he had to admit that he was, tired and getting a little cold - even if he were fresh, it was an impossible swing for anyone not a chimpanzee.

He looked down - and regretted it.

There was nothing below him but stars, down and down,

endlessly. Stars, swinging past as the ship spun with him, emptiness of all time and blackness and cold.

He found himself trying to hoist himself bodily onto the single narrow rung he clung to, trying to reach it with his toes. It was a futile, strength-wasting excess. He quieted his panic sufficiently to stop it, then hung limp.

It was easier if he kept his eyes closed. But after a while he always had to open them and look. The Big Dipper would swing past and then, presently, Orion. He tried to compute the passing minutes in terms of the number of rotations the ship made, but his mind would not work clearly, and, after a while, he would have to shut his eyes.

His hands were becoming stiff - and cold. He tried to rest them by hanging by one hand at a time. He let go with his left hand, felt pins-and-needles course through it, and beat it against his side. Presently it seemed time to spell his right hand.

He could no longer reach up to the rung with his left hand. He did not have the power left in him to make the extra pull; he was fully extended and could not shorten himself enough to get his left hand up.

He could no longer feel his right hand at all.

He could see it slip. It was slipping - The sudden release in tension let him know that he was falling falling. The ship dropped away from him.

He came to with the captain bending over him. 'Just keep quiet, Bill.'

'Where -,

'Take it easy. The patrol from Deimos was already close by when you let go. They tracked you on the 'scope, matched orbits with you, and picked you up. First time in history, I guess. Now keep quiet. You're a sick man - you hung there more than two hours, Bill.'

The meowing started up again, louder than ever. He got up on his knees and looked out over the windowsill. The kitten was still away to

the left on the ledge. He thrust his head cautiously out a little further, remembering not to look at anything but the kitten and the ledge. 'Here, kitty!' he called. 'Here, kit-kit-kitty! Here, kitty, come kitty!'

The kitten stopped washing and managed to look puzzled.

'Come, kitty,' he repeated softly. He let go the windowsill with his right hand and gestured toward it invitingly. The kitten approached about three inches, then sat down. 'Here, kitty,' he pleaded and stretched his arm as far as possible.

The fluff ball promptly backed away again.

He withdrew his arm and thought about it. This was getting nowhere, he decided. If he were to slide over the edge and stand on the ledge, he could hang on with one arm and be perfectly safe. He knew that, he knew it would be safe - he needn't look down!

He drew himself back inside, reversed himself, and, with great caution, gripping the sill with both arms, let his legs slide down the face of the building. He focused his eyes carefully on the corner of the bed.

The ledge seemed to have been moved. He could not find it, and was beginning to be sure that he had reached past it, when he touched it with one toe - then he had both feet firmly planted on it. It seemed about six inches wide. He took a deep breath.

Letting go with his right arm, he turned and faced the kitten. It seemed interested in the procedure but not disposed to investigate more closely. If he were to creep along the ledge, holding on with his left hand, he could just about reach it from the corner of the window - He moved his feet one at a time, baby fashion, rather than pass one past the other. By bending his knees a trifle, and leaning, he could just manage to reach it. The kitten sniffed his groping fingers, then leaped backward. One tiny paw missed the edge; it scrambled and regained its footing. 'You little idiot!' he said indignantly, 'do you want to bash your brains out?'

'If any,' he added. The situation looked hopeless now; the baby cat was too far away to be reached from his anchorage at the window, no matter how he stretched. He called 'Kitty, kitty' rather hopelessly, then stopped to consider the matter.

He could give it up.

He could prepare himself to wait all night in the hope that the kitten would decide to come closer. Or he could go get it.

The ledge was wide enough to take his weight. If he made himself small, flat to the wall, no weight rested on his left arm. He moved slowly forward, retaining the grip on the window as long as possible, inching so gradually that he hardly seemed to move. When the window frame was finally out of reach, when his left hand was flat to smooth wall, he made the mistake of looking down, down, past the sheer wall at the glowing pavement far below.

He pulled his eyes back and fastened them on a spot on the wall, level with his eyes and only a few feet away. He was still there!

And so was the kitten. Slowly he separated his feet, moving his right foot forward, and bent his knees. He stretched his right hand along the wall, until he was over and a little beyond the kitten.

He brought it down in a sudden swipe, as if to swat a fly. He found himself with a handful of scratching, biting fur.

He held perfectly still then, and made no attempt to check the minor outrages the kitten was giving him. Arms still outstretched, body flat to the wall, he started his return. He could not see where he was going and could not turn his head without losing some little of his margin of balance. It seemed a long way back, longer than he had come, when at last the fingertips of his left hand slipped into the window opening.

He backed up the rest of the way in a matter of seconds, slid both arms over the sill, then got his right knee over. He rested himself on the sill and took a deep breath. 'Man!' he said aloud. 'That was a tight squeeze. You're a menace to traffic, little cat.'

He glanced down at the pavement. It was certainly a long way down - looked hard, too.

He looked up at the stars. Mighty nice they looked and mighty bright. He braced himself in the window frame, back against one side, foot pushed against the other, and looked at them. The kitten settled down in the cradle of his stomach and began to buzz. He stroked it absent-mindedly and reached for a cigarette. He would go out to the port and take his physical and his psycho tomorrow, he decided. He scratched the kitten's ears. 'Little fluff head,' he said, 'how would you

like to take a long, long ride with me?'